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TAGS: PGOV SR  
SUBJECT: SERBIAN VOTERS HEAD TO POLLS IN FORCE

Summary

**¶1.** (SBU) In a country where the number of conspiracy theories exceeds the population, the assumption is that Saint John (whom Orthodox Serbs celebrate today) and the Democratic Party conspired to ensure the fine weather that brought voters to the polls in record numbers for Serbia's first round of presidential elections. While there is near universal expectation that voters will choose Radical Party candidate Tomislav Nikolic and Democratic Party's incumbent President Boris Tadic, from among a field of nine, to face one another in the February 3 run-off, the race for third place continues. The Liberal Democratic Party leader Cedomir (Ceda) Jovanovic ran a campaign that seemed to connect more with an apathetic populace than Tadic's message, and may have an edge. More important, he may just help win the reelection for the President, having privately promised to endorse Tadic after the polls close and the vote is counted. Looking down the road, the Liberal Democrats and the Socialists both hope for a good showing nationwide to position themselves well for May municipal and regional elections. An alliance between Ceda and Tadic could herald serious commitment to a reformist agenda in Serbia. End Summary.

Great Weather, Great Turnout

**¶2.** (U) Serbia's electorate headed to the polls early on January 20 to cast votes in the first round of presidential elections. Warm, dry weather and the holiday atmosphere of Serbia's St. John's Day festivities, may have been responsible for the steady stream of voters that emboffs reported around the country. Countrywide, the turnout averaged five percent an hour, and some observers anticipate more than 60% will vote before the polls close -- significantly more than expected. Some analysts suggest that voters might simply be voting earlier than is custom, in order to attend tonight's holiday parties, but at 1800 local, an ODIHR observer told emboff of 30- to 50-foot waiting lines to vote in Prokuplje and other central Serbia towns, with more voters arriving. In Nis, around 2000 local, emboffs saw voters racing to the door of one voting place, to ensure a place in line just before the doors closed.

**¶3.** (U) In any event, we saw steady streams of voters in and around Belgrade and other parts of the country. In the ethnically-mixed Belgrade community of Zvezdara, on the outskirts of the capital, the good turnout included voters of all demographics, crossing age and ethnic lines to include Serbs and Roma. In the town of Pirot, near the Bulgarian border, some observers told emboffs of 50% turnout by 1000 local, with young democratic voters, especially, heading to the polls. In Novi Pazar, where politics divide the Islamic community, Mayor Uglanin endorsed New Serbia candidate Ilic, although anecdotal reporting by emboffs and contacts on the ground suggested that LDP's Ceda might run second to Tadic. Only in southern Serbia, does the turnout appear to have been light, with some speculating a final return of about 15% or less for the region. Emboffs report, however, no stories of intimidation or threats of retaliation for Albanians casting votes. Bujanovac and Presevo majors voted and,

for the first time, ethnic Albanians represented nationwide parties as poll watchers. An unrelated effort to register citizens to participate in a program to distribute shares of state-held companies may have increased the turnout of Roma and others in south Serbia who, we heard, mistakenly believed that they had to vote to collect their shares. No one suggested that any individuals or parties had intentionally misled these voters.

**¶4.** (U) Party observers and poll watchers around the country told poloffs that the voting was, in general, remarkably clean. With three hours until the polls close, the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSid) announced in a press conference that their observers deployed throughout Serbia had reported no irregularities that would make a difference in the outcome of the election. CeSid said that in one polling station, authorities failed for a while to spray the fingers of voters with invisible ink to prevent them from voting more than once. Emboffs reported that some party field observers and New Serbia headquarters staff spoke of the failure of voting stations to check voter identification, but that this seemed to occur more often in the countryside where poll watchers personally knew the voters. The press reported one death by natural causes of a Radical Party voter, just prior to the opening of polls. Emboffs in Sandzak reported unconfirmed stories of some voters being moved from voting station to voting station, voting from private homes and coffee houses and accusations that Radical Party members had intimidated known voters of other parties.

#### Radical, Democratic Party Successes

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**¶5.** (SBU) At Radical Party headquarters in Belgrade, SRS Deputy Alexander Vucic told emboffs that Nikolic would win the day. Vucic said turnout was better than he had anticipated. He was proud that the Radicals had run such a clean campaign, and said he had learned a lot from the Americans -- Barak Obama and Hillary Clinton, that is. Remarking on the candidates' style, Vucic said Obama was his

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favorite campaigner.

**¶6.** (SBU) In Belgrade, DS Member of Parliament Konstantinovic told emboffs he also was pleased with the better-than-expected turnout, which he expected favored Tadic. In 2004, Nikolic beat Tadic in Novi Sad by 1.5%, and DS leaders in Vojvodina told emboffs they hoped to narrow or eliminate the gap, this time. In Novi Sad DS headquarters, phone bank staffers reminded party members to vote. Others drove disabled voters to the voting stations. DS officials in Nis told emboff they were strongly encouraged by the large youth turnout.

#### Socialist and Liberals Position Parties for Local Elections

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**¶7.** (SBU) On January 18, Social party leader Ivica Dacic and candidate Mrkonjic told poloff that they believed they had a good chance of pulling 7-8% of the vote on election day. Dacic said that his constituency was divided and that he would endorse neither Nikolic nor Tadic in the second round. His party's goal, Dacic said, was to build party strength in advance of the May local elections. LDP's Ceda Jovanovic told the Ambassador and DCM a similar story, on January 18, although he set his sights on a 10% share of the vote for president.

**¶8.** (U) Ceda ran a race that many western-oriented voters said connected significantly better than Tadic's campaign. His party's election day activity appeared targeted and effective. In Vojvodina, 1,500 party members and volunteers worked at 170 voting stations. LDP headquarters in Belgrade buzzed with energetic party members staffing a bank of 30 computers and phones, ensuring that LDP voters got to the polls.

LDP to Lend Support to the DS

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**¶9.** (SBU) Ceda may save the race for Tadic. The highly motivated

SRS electorate will almost certainly lead Nikolic to first place in the first round. It is equally certain that Tadic will follow in second, although there is significant speculation about the size of the gap between the two. On January 18 Ceda told the Ambassador that he would throw his support to Tadic on January 20, immediately following the end of voting. Tadic ran a dismal campaign, Ceda said, and needed LDP help to prevent a Radical victory. The strength of this endorsement will depend on how Ceda places at the end of the vote count. Ceda told the Ambassador he was hoping/expecting to walk away with 10% of the returns. Our field observers suggested he was doing well, especially in Novi Pazar, Novi Sad, and Belgrade. Ceda's support will not only help Tadic edge out the Radical Nikolic, it will also will significantly diminish Tadic's dependence on Prime Minister Kostunica's endorsement. CeSid speculates that more than one half of the PM's Democratic Party of Serbia's voters will cast ballots for Tadic in the run-off, even if Kostunica tells them to stay home.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) Serbia's voters came out in force to exercise their democratic right to choose their leader. It remains to the run-off to be seen whether they will choose a candidate that will lead them forward or into isolation. The good news is that the electorate was highly motivated today. If Tadic is able to run an energetic campaign in the second round, he may just be able to win. End  
Comment.

MUNTER